

By Darlene Friedman

This is the tale of two girls. They may not be real (both are composites of many different girls) but their struggles are—unfortunately—all too real.

One struggles with the fundamental deficits of being a girl born into a poor, patriarchal country. The other struggles with pressures of a different kind, often seen in wealthy, developed countries.

“Alile,” whose name means “she weeps,” is 14. She was born when her mother was 15. Each day, Alile must walk miles to fetch water. The rest of her day is spent helping her mother with household chores. Although she desperately wants an education, only her brothers go to school.

She is malnourished and tired most of the time, because her father and brothers consume most of what little food they have. Soon Alile will be forced into an arranged marriage, possibly to a much older man who will beat and abuse her. She is likely to become pregnant and suffer the physical effects often accompanying teenage childbirth. Alile dreams of a better, different life. One where she can make her own decisions.

Half a world away, “Sarah,” 15, lives in an affluent suburb in the United States. Lately her life has become unendurable because she is the target of bullying. Suffering from low self-esteem and unhappy with her body image, Sarah has an unhealthy relationship with food and often starves herself. She wants to be thin and pretty like the girls she sees in movies, on TV and in magazines.

Sarah tells no one about her suffering. Not her parents. Not her friends. Not her guidance counselor at school. She feels alone and hopeless, and thinks about hurting or even killing herself.

When she was younger, Sarah dreamed of becoming an aerospace engineer. But now, Sarah is thinking about dropping out of school and dreams of the day when the pain will stop.

Every day, in every part of the world, girls like Alile and Sarah are severely affected by virtue of one reality—their gender. The statistics and circumstances, for girls in both the developed and developing world, are startling.

According to Plan International, an international organization working on poverty relief <www.plan-international.org>, girls like Alile are vulnerable in a number of ways:

- **Malnourishment.** Families in the developing world feed girls last.
- **Lack of education.** Between 65-75 million girls currently do not attend primary and lower-secondary school, either because their families can't afford it or because it's frowned upon culturally for girls to be educated.
- **HIV.** About 66 percent of newly infected youth are female. Often girls are infected by older men.
- **Maternal mortality or pregnancy complications.** Girls who give birth before their bodies are ready are at risk of dying or suffering from obstetric fistula.
- **Child brides.** Approximately 70,000 teenage girls are married each day (25 million per year).
- **Harmful cultural practices.** Girls in some patriarchal cultures are subjected to social conventions such as female circumcision, which causes untold pain and misery lasting a lifetime.



WORLDS—ONE DREAM

Helping Girls Succeed



Illustration by: Alicia Buelow

- **Sex trafficking.** As many as three million women and girls are in sexual servitude around the world.
- **Intergenerational poverty.** Of the 1.5 billion people living in poverty (less than \$1 a day), 70 percent are female (21 percent of people worldwide). A full 25 percent of girls around the world live in poverty so extreme they do not have enough food, water, housing, clothing, sanitation, health care or education. And for most of these girls, the cycle of poverty will continue with their children.

Girls in developing nations are often invisible. Their needs are little understood, much less addressed. Sadly, gender discrimination begins even before birth where in some parts of the world, female fetuses are likely to be aborted.

It would seem girls in the U.S., Canada, Japan and other developed nations have better lives, simply because of their countries' economic standards. But the truth is many girls like Sarah face their own unique challenges:

- **Major depression.** Up to 20 percent of girls ages 10-19 are depressed, according to Dr. Stephen Hinshaw in his book *The Triple Bind*. About 10 percent of all teenage girls in the U.S. tried to end their lives in 2005. Between 2003-2004, the number of girls ages 10-14 who killed themselves rose by 76 percent (since the 1990s). That number for girls ages 15-19 rose by 36 percent.
- **Self-mutilation, cutting and burning.** Because these behaviors are usually secret, there are no reliable statistics on how widespread these practices are.
- **Eating disorders.** An estimated 70 million people (85-90 percent of whom are women and girls) suffer from eating disorders, particularly in the developed world.
- **Teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.** The U.S. leads developed countries in teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Twenty-two percent of adolescent girls have a child before age 20. The rates for Great Britain, Canada, France and Sweden are 15, 11, 6 and 4 percent respectively. More than 25 percent of U.S. girls ages 14-19 are infected with at least one sexually transmitted disease.
- **Substance abuse problems.** For the first time, girls now exceed boys as first-time marijuana smokers.
- **Teen dating violence** (see sidebar on page 16).

According to Hinshaw, at least one quarter of all U.S. teenage girls are suffering from mutilation, eating disorders, significant depression and/or serious consideration of suicide. He says girls today face

a "triple bind" in that they must now be good at both traditional girl (look pretty, have empathy, etc.) and boy (be athletic, get good grades) ideals—forcing them to conform to a narrow set of standards.

"I think it's really hard to be a girl today," states Eden Roth, a 14-year-old from outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. "I have a friend who had to get treatment for anorexia, another who cuts herself, and several others who suffer from severe depression—including suicidal thoughts.

"There's a lot of pressure—what you look like, what you wear, what you say. It's just really hard."

Roth, who reads a lot of fact-based fiction about girls in other countries, continues, "Even though we don't have the horrible problems girls who live in other countries have—like war, starvation and a basic lack of rights—we still have 'mini-wars' within ourselves."

Education, Interrupted

The root causes of the challenges facing girls are complex and interwoven. Cultural practices and beliefs, poverty, gender inequality, and media stereotypes collide to create a perfect storm—preventing millions of girls worldwide from achieving their own potential or contributing to solving the world's most intractable problems.

Girls like Alile in the developing world desperately want an education. Bintou, a girl from Mali featured on the Plan International UK site, says, "In my life what I'd really, really, really like is an education. This is the issue most in my heart and

most on my mind. I want my own children to be educated so they get good jobs. In the future I hope to not be poor or rich, but to be able to earn a living and to provide for my mother."

Economic and cultural realities often crush the dreams of girls like Alile and Bintou, as many will likely never even enter primary school. The World Bank reports that 35 million girls do not attend primary school.

Poverty is a particularly significant barrier in countries that lack the resources needed to provide low-cost or free education to low-income girls who need it most. Linked to poverty is the parental preference for the education of boys over girls, a prevailing cultural norm in many developing nations.

Other factors inhibiting a girl from getting an education include unsafe and long commutes, and a lack of transportation, sanitary supplies, and proper nutrition.

The number one reason girls don't go to school is because ... they are girls. "I would choose manhood if I could," laments Bintou, commenting on the lack of choice and opportunity for girls in Mali.



Bintou, of Mali, believes an education will be the determining factor in her life and the lives of the children she hopes to have one day.

Photo credit: Vanessa Whyte, for Plan International UK. www.plan-uk.org

Although girls in the developed world are not denied an education, like Sarah they may face a host of social problems that derail their progress. And for girls in poor communities, their struggles can rival those of their sisters in developing nations. The dropout rate is significant in the U.S., for instance, where one in four girls does not finish school. The numbers are worse for girls of color, with four in 10 African-American girls and nearly four in 10 Hispanic female students failing to graduate with a diploma.

Bullying, or “relational aggression,” is one reason girls leave school. Emotional problems, including eating disorders, is another. In a recent study of nearly 10,000 girls ages 8-12 in the United States, 17 percent induced vomiting or used laxatives or diet pills to lose weight. By the time girls like Sarah reach adolescence, eating disorders are the third most common chronic illness affecting them. In Japan, one in every 20 girls enrolled in high schools in the Tokyo metropolitan area suffers from anorexia nervosa. The striking paradox is that girls in developed countries suffer from eating disorders, while those like Alile in developing countries suffer from insufficient food consumption.

Poverty and feeling unsafe are two other reasons cited for girls dropping out of school. But according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, the number one reason teen girls drop out of high school is pregnancy. Three in 10 young women in the United States will become pregnant before the age of 20, a rate 25 percent higher than any other developed nation.

Finding Solutions

What are girls like Alile and Sarah saying about their needs and rights in today’s world? In a report by the International Center for Research on Women <www.icwr.org>, girls say they want their voices to be heard and they want families, communities, policymakers, governments and NGOs to listen to their aspirations and support the pursuit of their goals and dreams—including the right to an education.

For the first time, development agencies and non-profits agree that empowering women and girls is a key goal in solving the world’s most pressing problems. Organizations and initiatives including the Girl Effect, Plan International’s Because I am a Girl Campaign, the Clinton Global Initiative, Heifer, Half the Sky, and Care International are joining organizations like Soroptimist in focusing on the problems and potential of women and girls.

Alile and Sarah, Bintou and Eden share the same dream: to have control over their own lives and a bright future. Experts in the girl development movement offer ideas to help them fulfill that dream.

Pegine Echevarria, MSW and author of *For All our Daughters: How Mentoring Helps Young Women and Girls Master the Art of Growing Up* believes that strong

Two Worlds, One Dream continued on page 16



In Nepal, it costs a mere \$100 to keep a girl in school and safe from traffickers for one year.

Photo credit: American Himalayan Foundation

Educated Girls Less Vulnerable to Trafficking

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to free education in the elementary and fundamental stages (Article 26), and No one shall be held in slavery or servitude... (Article 4).”

But the truth is, in much of the world, education is not free, and slavery does exist. An estimated 2.5 million people worldwide are held in slavery through human trafficking. Traffickers prey on the poor and the ignorant. To an impoverished family a son represents economic stability, but a daughter is often seen as a burden. Parents in economic desperation are duped and bribed into sending their daughter away from home with a stranger who offers her reputable work. In reality their daughter, who may be as young as 6 years old, is forced into the criminal and violent industry of sex slavery.

By contrast, educated girls who achieve professional goals can have a positive impact on the economic stability of her family. But the education of the poorest girls in developing countries requires a partnership between her family and a benefactor. The American Himalayan Foundation project Stop Girl Trafficking <www.himalayan-foundation.org/projects/girl-trafficking> is based upon the premise, “Target the most likely areas where traffickers prey, put the girls in school ... educate them and their families about sex trafficking ... traffickers steer clear of villages where such programs exist.” Since 1997, Stop Girl Trafficking has supported over 9,500 girls in 400 schools across Nepal. Not one has fallen prey to traffickers. —Janet Povero

Janet Povero, MPH, a member of SI/Azusa-Glendora, California, is an educator in health promotion and disease prevention and an advocate for human rights. In December and January 2009-2010 she traveled to Nepal with Empower Nepali Girls, awarding education scholarships and collecting data for her thesis on child marriage. In 2011 she traveled to the highlands of Kenya where she partnered with a private health clinic to conduct an in-home health survey of 100 residents.

Empowering Girls

One factor that can derail a girl and even cause her to drop out of school is teen dating violence. In the U.S., one in three girls will have an abusive dating experience by the time she graduates from high school. Often, family members tend to minimize teen dating violence, chalking it up to fights between young lovers or the drama of puppy love. And with today's technological devices and social media, dating partners often control and abuse girls 24 hours a day, even when they are not physically together.

Soroptimist believes that educating girls—and boys—about teen dating violence is the first step to ending it. Through its Teen Dating Violence awareness program, the organization offers a variety of resources including a model program kit, and a teen dating violence bookmark that lists characteristics of a healthy relationship on one side, dangerous traits on the other, along with prevention hot-line numbers.

One way to ensure that girls stay healthy psychologically is encouraging them to look outside themselves. Girls who engage with their communities in meaningful ways tend to avoid the pitfalls of dating violence and negative body images, among others. Through its Violet Richardson Award program, Soroptimist supports girls who give back to their communities. In addition to making their communities stronger, the girls, like this year's finalist Lizbeth Cabrera (see page 10), develop leadership skills that will serve them well throughout their lives. Violet Richardson Award winners also serve as positive role models for other girls.

See page 11 for more information about Soroptimist club projects that empower adolescent girls to live their dreams.

Two Worlds, One Dream continued from page 15
female mentors are key to helping girls grow up strong and healthy.

"You must point your daughter toward a trusty role model—an aunt, a cousin, a grandmother, a Girl Scout leader, a teacher, a friend, or some other responsible caring woman because your daughter's survival depends on it," she says. Echevarria adds that girls will often not speak to their own parents for fear of disappointing them, so it's critical they have other adults in whom they can confide.

Sara Nowlin, program director for Girls' Leadership Worldwide at the Eleanor Roosevelt Center at Val-Kill urges girls, particularly those in developed countries, to connect with a wider world. "When girls are out making a difference, then they're spending less time focusing on the media and comparing themselves to what's in the media," she states. "The more opportunities girls have to really find their own inner strength and balance it with external strength, they can then go out and be advocates for themselves."

Soroptimist sponsors the Violet Richardson Award, which encourages girls to look outside themselves through their volunteer activities. (See the article about this year's finalist winner on page 10.)

Eden Roth developed her own project to benefit wolves, an animal she cares about deeply. She took orders and sewed pillows in exchange for donations that were funneled to an animal conservation organization <www.defenders-blog.org/2011/08/eden-roth-a-true-defender-of-wildlife/>. "It feels good to work hard on something that makes a positive difference, whatever your particular cause is," she says.

The most important strategy for securing the future for girls—in both the developed and developing world—is to make sure they get a quality education that will prepare them to lead productive lives. To combat the teenage pregnancy problem in the U.S., many schools take a multidimensional approach to keeping pregnant and parenting teen girls in school, either through special programs, or separate schools specifically targeting this population. Emily Cambry is a social worker in the Chicago, Illinois, public schools



Photo credit: Darlene Friedman

When girls look outside themselves, they develop inner strength. Eden Roth created "Pillows for Pups," a project benefiting wolves, as a way to positively contribute to the world.

who provides services at Simpson Academy for Young Women, the only Chicago public school for parenting and pregnant teenage girls. Her work includes addressing the social and emotional learning needs of students, identifying their strengths and goals, emphasizing the importance of completing their secondary school education, and examining career options. Cambry works with the student and her family, school, and community members to foster open communication and ensure the student has an advocate.

"Creating a positive climate in all areas of the school setting is imperative to facilitate their engagement and connectedness with the school, and ensure that they feel involved and invested in achieving short- and long-term goals," Cambry says in a recent issue of *Social Worker Today*.

While efforts in the developed world might focus on making sure girls graduate from high school, strategies in developing areas might concentrate on making sure a girl gets a primary school education (at the very least). Experts agree that educating girls in the developing world ultimately lifts them out of poverty and diminishes their future vulnerability. And while it won't solve all of the social issues stealing away girls' dreams, it is the single most powerful way to level the playing field and ensure girls have a voice.

Says Nicholas Kristof, co-author of *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into*

Opportunity for Women Worldwide, “I think girls’ education may be the single most cost-effective kind of aid work. It’s cheap, it opens minds, it gives girls new career opportunities and ways to generate cash, it leads them to have fewer children, and it tends to bring women from the shadows into the formal economy and society. It’s not a panacea, of course. ... But overall, educating girls probably has a greater transformative effect on a country than anything else one can do.”

According to Plan International, when girls have the same opportunities as boys, they are more likely to reinvest their income to benefit their families and whole communities; investing in girls delivers a higher return than any other investment made in a country’s development. For every year a girl like Alile stays in school, her income will rise by 10-20 percent. She will be more likely to marry later and have fewer and healthier children. She has a greater chance of remaining healthy and alive, and if she does, her children will be three to 10 times more likely to survive as well. Educated girls are also less vulnerable to traffickers (see sidebar on page 15). Educating girls and bringing them into the economy is also a powerful way to prevent extremism and terrorism.

“We agree education is the most significant factor to ensure that girls—in both the developed and developing worlds—have a bright future,” says Lori Blair, Soroptimist’s senior director of program services. “And one way to achieve the sustained education of girls is to make sure their mothers are educated. When a mother is educated, the chances of her girl children receiving an education increase dramatically.”

Soroptimist, which provides women with access to education through its Women’s Opportunity Awards program, is currently researching the development of a new project targeting vulnerable girls. Adds Blair: “Removing obstacles, whatever they are, that prevent girls from getting an educa-

tion is critical to ensuring their long-term success.”

Kristof advocates simple solutions in the developing world including offering scholarships to girls who do well in school, helping girls manage their menstruation by providing sanitary pads and ensuring they have access to toilets at school, providing financial incentives to poor families who send their girls to school, and deworming students in areas where this is a problem (it increases student alertness and reduces school absenteeism for as little as 50 cents per student).

“Supporting and providing aid to these kinds of innovative programs, which have proven effective, is one way we can help expand the number of girls attending school worldwide,” he says on his Half the Sky website. “It will also hopefully help spur other successful initiatives to step up girls’ education.”

Alile and Sarah represent two girls from two very different worlds waiting to live their dreams. Whether it’s helping girls in the developed world to avoid dating violence, or assisting girls in developing nations to get an education, support from the international community and caring individuals can make those dreams a reality.

“To me,” adds Eden Roth, “Helping girls to get equal rights and an education is the most important thing we can do ... so we can all be free to have the kind of lives we want.”

For more information, read the Soroptimist white papers, Putting Girls First: <www.soroptimist.org/whitepapers/wp_puttinggirlsfirst.html> and Teen Dating Violence: <www.soroptimist.org/whitepapers/wp_teendating.html>.

Darlene Friedman is SIA’s senior director of membership marketing, and managing editor of *Best for Women* magazine.

In the next issue: Family Leave. Please email Editor Jessica Puterbaugh <jessica@soroptimist.org> with relevant information.

Taking Action

What does it mean to put girls first? Soroptimist clubs do this by building girls’ self-esteem, working to stop the cycle of abuse and cultivating strong female leaders through the Violet Richardson Award and the Teen Dating Violence Awareness Project.

Soroptimist Violet Richardson Award:

The Violet Richardson Award program recognizes young women ages 14-17 for demonstrating leadership by identifying an issue important to them in their communities and the world, and addressing it through their volunteer efforts. In addition to recognizing young women for their efforts to make the world a better place, the program provides recipients with leadership opportunities that encourage and support them to continue their work as community leaders.

To access detailed instructions about how clubs can participate in the Soroptimist Violet Richardson Award, visit <Soroptimist.org/members/program/Program_VioletRichardson.html>.

Soroptimist Teen Dating Violence Project:

Teen dating violence affects an estimated 33-50 percent of young women, and the prevalence of this issue can leave advocates wondering how and where to begin working to reduce this violence.

Soroptimist removes the guesswork by providing accessible options for clubs to become involved with awareness-raising through teen education on healthy relationship dynamics. This program reinforces to teens that every girl deserves to be treated with love and respect. By working to ensure teens have access to the information and resources they need, Soroptimist helps young girls navigate relationship decisions in an informed way to prevent or stop the cycle of abuse as early as possible.

Check out these Soroptimist online resources to get started on girl projects <www.soroptimist.org/members/program/SoroptimistPrograms.html>:

- **Teen Dating Violence Model Program Kit:** Minimize club research and project development time by using a model program kit to plan and implement a teen dating violence prevention project.
- **Soroptimist Teen Dating Violence Awareness Day:** Educate the community through a day devoted to awareness-raising!
- **Teen Dating Violence White Paper:** Learn more about the prevalence and impact of teen dating violence worldwide.
- **Putting Girls First White Paper:** Learn more about the critical issues facing today’s girls.